

THE ETHIOPIAN NO. 2536

A SERMON
INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1897
DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON
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*“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?
then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.”
Jeremiah 13:23*

JEREMIAH had a friend who was a black man. Ebed-Melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, had a great and tender concern for Jeremiah when he was shut up in the miry prison, and he took ropes and covered them with rags that they might not cut the poor prophet's armpits, and drew him up out of that filthy well into which he had been cast for the truth's sake.

I suppose, from the way Ebed-Melech afterwards treated the prophet Jeremiah, that they were great friends. And as we usually talk of people of whom we are fond, it was natural that Jeremiah should use the Ethiopian as an emblem. I do not know that any other prophet did so. Perhaps there was no other prophet who took to a Negro so thoroughly as Jeremiah did. But anyway, he had that black man's face imprinted on his mind and when he was speaking to the people, the Holy Spirit moved him to use a simile with which he had become familiar.

I wish that every thought and experience I have ever had could be used in speaking for my Lord. I would like to never set my eyes on anyone or anything without trying to turn all to good account for the Master's work. And if those of us who are teachers of others will only go about with our eyes open, we shall find plenty of illustrations of the truths we have to proclaim. There will not be a black man cross our path but we shall learn something or other from him.

Let us go at once to our text and notice that it contains *a question which admits of only one answer*—“Can the Ethiopian change his skin?” Of course he cannot. And this fact suggests to us a spiritual question—Can a man who is accustomed to do evil, so change himself as to do good? Of course he cannot, any more than the Ethiopian can change his skin.

When we have talked over that question which admits of only one answer, I shall put *another question which admits of the opposite reply*. In that latter part of our subject, may the Lord be pleased to send comfort to those who are despairing and who know that they can no more change their own nature than the Ethiopian can change his skin, or the leopard his spots!

I. First, we are to consider A QUESTION WHICH ADMITS OF ONLY ONE ANSWER—“Can the Ethiopian change his skin?”

No one ever heard of such a thing being done. Very wonderful things have occurred, but no one has ever yet heard of a blackamoor who has been able to wash himself white. It was an old fable of Aesop as to the absurdity of attempting to do anything of the kind, and often, when we want to point out that a thing cannot be done, we use this simile, and say, “You cannot change the blackamoor's skin.”

There are some things that men can do. A white man may be made almost black, as far as his skin is concerned. There are certain medicines that operate upon the skin and give it a very strange color—you may have seen a few such cases in your lifetime. But though you can put the color in, you cannot take it out.

The man who is white, or the woman who is very fair, may either of them sit in the sun till they become browned so that they might almost say with the spouse in the Song of Solomon, “I am black,

because the sun hath looked upon me,” but you could not turn a black man white, though you can turn a white man black. You can do what you please by way of spoiling, but you can do nothing by way of mending.

You can make yourself filthy by sin, but you cannot make yourself spiritually clean, do what you will. There is an ease about going down—you can jump down a precipice quickly enough, but who could stand at the bottom of a high cliff and leap to the top at one bound? Man can come down against his will, but he cannot go up even with his will. You can do evil all too readily—you can do it with both hands, greedily, and do it again and again, and not grow weary of it—but to return to the right path, this is the difficulty. As Virgil said about his arduous task when he went down to the land of shades, “Easy is the descent to Avernus, but to return to the clear air again—this is the work, this is the difficulty.”

You have all seen persons make themselves black externally—the chimney sweep, in pursuit of his lawful calling, becomes quite as black as a Negro, yet, with a basin of water, he can change the look of his face very speedily, because the blackness is only something outside of him which merely adheres to him for a time.

But the question of our text is, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin?” That is a part of himself and he cannot alter it. The Ethiopian can wash himself clean and he ought to do so, it is his duty to do so. And a man can keep himself moral and he ought to do so, it is his duty. If the Negro is ever so black, he may be clean, but he cannot wash himself white, neither can a sinner cleanse himself from the stains of his guilt.

But remember, dear friends, that, even if an Ethiopian could change his skin, that would be a far smaller difficulty than the one with which a sinner has to deal, for it is not his skin, but his heart which has to be changed. There are some creatures in which, if they lose a limb, it will grow again, or another will come in its place, but there is no creature living that could lose its heart and then grow another.

There is a tree of a certain sort and you can, if you please, graft upon it and it will produce a different kind of fruit. Or you can take off one limb of a tree and another branch may grow—but you cannot change the tree’s heart. Even if it were possible for the Ethiopian to change his skin, that would be a change, as we say, only skin-deep, and that is no parallel to the sinner and his sin—the leprosy lies deep within. It is the heart that is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” It is the center and source of thought and action which is polluted and a change must be wrought there. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin?” No, but if he could do so, could a sinner change his heart? Assuredly not.

Observe, dear friends, that the question is about an Ethiopian changing his skin himself. That cannot be done, certainly, but if it could be done, a man could not himself change his own heart. For an evil heart to make its own self good is inconceivable. Darkness never did beget light. You may sit as long as you like in the sepulchre amid the dry bones, but life will never be born of death—life must come from quite a different source.

The earth warms the seeds in her bosom and nourishes them into growth, but if those seeds were dead, all the genial seasons could not make them spring up. And even if the earth could make dead seeds to live, that is not the kind of miracle of which we are speaking—the miracle would be for the dead seed to make itself alive. That is utterly beyond the bounds of possibility.

The figure in our text is a very strong one. As I have said before the Ethiopian cannot change his own skin, but even that figure is not strong enough to express the utter helplessness of human nature as to its own renewal, for the change is greater and deeper—and it is quite impossible that it ever should come from fallen human nature.

Let me try to set forth, in some small measure, the difficulty of this business. The first difficulty is, because the evil that man has is *in his nature*. If sin were merely an accident, then it might be prevented. But it is not so. If sheep were to fall down into the mire, they might soon be up again, and it would be possible to keep them from falling.

But when the swine go down into the mud, they roll in it because they delight in wallowing. As long as there is any mire about and the sow can get there, she will return to her wallowing as long as she remains a sow, for the filthiness is in her nature as well as in that which surrounds her.

And it is so with us so far as sin is concerned. The Ethiopian could wash himself clean, but the blackness of his skin is a part of his Ethiopian nature and he cannot get rid of that. The leopard's spots are not accidental to it, but it has spots because it is a leopard.

So, sin is not accidental to human nature, but it is part and parcel of ourselves. When you see a man, you see a sinner. And if you could look into his heart, you would see the seed-plot of all manner of mischief, which only needs congenial surroundings to fully develop itself. How can a man change his own nature? I do not suppose that, by any possibility, I could ever become an Ethiopian.

I do not think that, if I were to set my mind to the task, I could ever, by any possibility, turn into a Dutchman, because I was not born so—it is not according to my nature. I must remain an Englishman, Essex-born, as long as I live. Only a miracle could make me anything different from that, and the sinner is a sinner right through. Wherever you look at him, he is a sinner, and so he always will be unless a superior power shall intervene to change him.

Alas! also, this evil nature of man brings with it the fact that *his will* is altogether perverted. A man will not cease to do evil and learn to do well, because he has no heart to do it. Sinners do not want to be saved. "Oh!" says one, "I do." But do you understand what it is to be saved? Every sinner would like to escape from going to hell, but that is not what is meant by salvation.

To be saved means to be saved from loving evil, from seeking after it, and living in it. Do you want to be saved from that? Do you want to be saved from falsehood, saved from the indulgence of your passions, saved from strong drink, saved from pride, saved from covetousness? The most of men have not a heart inclined to that—there is some sweet sin of theirs which they would like to sip, at least now and then upon the sly.

That is to say, evil, as evil, is not abhorrent to the natural will, but the natural will of man goes after that which is evil as surely as ever children seek after that which is sweet. Sin is sweet to man and he will have it if he can. How, then, can his nature be changed while he has no will to it? The will is, as it were, the rudder of the ship.

My Lord Will-be-will, according to John Bunyan, is the Lord Mayor of the town of Mansoul. And so he is, and he carries it in a very lordly way. He will have this and he will have that—and he will not have the other—and he is the master of the man. Till the will is changed, till what is called "free will," is made in truth to be free will—free from the chains of evil and the love of sin—the man cannot rise to happiness and God any more than the Ethiopian can change his skin.

Moreover, in connection with this natural depravity and the perversity of the human will, there comes to be *the power of habit*. Oh, what an awful force the power of evil habit has upon a man! It begins at first only like a cobweb—he can break it when he pleases. It grows into a thread and he is somewhat restrained by it. It changes to a cord and he is in a net. It hardens into iron and the iron becomes further hardened into steel—and the man is shut up in it. He becomes like the starling that cried, "I cannot get out. I cannot get out." The sad thing is that the man is in a cage of his own making. It is a sort of living cage which has grown up all round him and he cannot escape from it.

How often is this the case with strong drink! The man at first only took a very little, but how much does he take now? Mr. Wesley, when dining once with a friend of his who had greatly helped him in the district, saw him, after dinner, rise from the table and get just a little brandy and water. And Mr. Wesley said to him, "My friend, what is that?" "I am very much troubled with indigestion," he answered, "but I only take a tablespoonful of brandy in a little water."

"Well," said Mr. Wesley, "that is certainly very little, but my friend, you will want two tablespoonfuls before long to do for you what you think that one does. And then you will want four, and then you will want eight, and unless you give it up, I fear that you will become a drunkard and disgrace the cause of God." After Mr. Wesley was dead, that man still lived a drunkard—he had lost his

reputation, disgraced the people with whom he had been connected, and brought untold sorrow upon himself.

Now, as it is with that one particular sin, so it is with every other. If a sin comes, alone, to your house the first time alone, it will come the next time with seven other devils more wicked than itself—and those seven will very soon bring seven each and you will have a legion of devils. And when you get one legion, it is highly probable that another legion will come into the barracks of your heart and stay there.

The beginning of sin is like the letting out of water—just a little drop trickles through the wall of the dike, then it becomes a tiny rivulet which a child's hand can stop—then it increases to a stream, and soon the dike begins to heave, and break, and crack, and by and by it is broken down, and a torrent rushes over town and village, and carries away multitudes of men with it. Beware! That evil habit is a dreadful thing—he who yields to an evil habit is preparing himself for the bottomless pit.

In addition to this habit, I grieve to say that there generally springs up a kind of *delight in sin*. There are, no doubt, some men who, for a time, feel an intense satisfaction in sin. Ay, and not only in their own sins, but they take pleasure in the sins of others. I hope you never hear them talk. If it has ever been your misfortune to do so, you know that they will talk about some piece of filthiness as if it were a brave thing.

They will boast about what some boy has done under their abominable tuition and they seem to take a delight in seeing how precocious he is in everything that is vile. Some men are never happy except when they are destroying souls, and while the deepest pleasure under heaven is to bring a soul to God, the most diabolical pleasure out of hell is certainly that of helping to damn a soul. Yet there are many who seem to take a delight in that terrible work.

How some skeptics endeavor to entrap a youthful believer! How some licentious persons seem to lay themselves out to try and seduce others! How many there are who have become ripe in iniquity and their evil seed is scattered broadcast, sowing sin and everlasting ruin upon every wind that blows! Can such an Ethiopian as that change his skin or such a leopard as that his spots? Of course he cannot—the case is utterly hopeless so far as his own power is concerned.

Further than this, *the force of sin increases upon men*. If a stone is let fall from a tower, it multiplies the pace of its fall in a mathematical ratio. It drops very much faster the last part of its descent than it did at the first. Set anything rolling down a hill and see how the momentum increases. A railway truck has got on a decline—it is running down. It starts slowly enough at first, you might easily stop it. But let it go on and see how it accumulates force as it rushes along, till it breaks through every obstacle.

Well, just such is the power of sin in men—they seem as if they cannot sin enough. Having once given themselves up to the demon power, it comes upon them stronger and yet stronger, till the appetite grows within them into a passion and a fury—and a fire that burns like the flame of Gehenna that cannot be slowed or quenched.

I know what they think at first—that they will go just so far and then stop. Well, try it—no, do not try it. It would be an awful experiment to set a house on fire, intending to let it burn just so much and no more. Can you say to the fire, “You shall come this far, but no farther”? Even if you could say it to fire among standing corn, blown by the wind, yet you would say it in vain to sin. Sin swiftly grows from a pigmy to a giant, and ever increasing in its awful power, it crushes down the man who is in its grip and holds him under its dreadful sway.

There are many drunkards who now have within them a compulsion to drink. They seem as if they could not pass by the door of the drink-shop. There is many an adulterer who cannot glance without a lascivious thought. As for the gambler—and I dare to say that there is no sin that does more swiftly send men down to hell than gambling—having once begun with his shilling and his pound, he will plunge till he has lost his all. There is an awful infatuation about this evil—it is a stream that catches the boat and bears it swiftly along, noiselessly, but with irresistible force, till it comes to the cataract of endless ruin.

Oh, that you could escape! But there are some who never can and never will—and there is not one of us who can escape unless He who is mighty to save shall come in with His own right hand and His holy arm, and get unto Himself the victory. For when once the force of sin really grasps a man, we may ask concerning him, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin?” and answer, “No, he cannot.”

Added to all this there is another horrible evil, that is—after a while *the understanding refuses to see*. The man who, at first, knew a thing to be wrong, may continue in it till he does not believe it to be wrong at all. There are men who can utter language which would have chilled their blood when they first began to swear. But now it drops from them as an ordinary word.

I believe that the filthy talkers of our street, or the most of them, do not mean anything by what they say—they have got so hardened in misusing the Lord’s name and using obscene language that their understanding does not convict them of having done wrong. They have given Mr. Conscience so much opium that he has gone to sleep. Now and then, perhaps, he wakes up and makes a great noise—but they soon lull him to sleep again—and they go on sinning without compunction.

We read of David, on one occasion, that his heart smote him. It is an ugly knock when your own heart smites you, for that blow comes home. But it is also a blessed knock and if any of you have never felt it, I am very sorry for you. If your heart never smites you, it must be because your conscience has fallen into a dead sleep, or is seared as with a red-hot iron. When a man reaches that stage that he can lie and swear, and then can wipe his mouth and say that there is nothing in it, oh, how shall such a man be changed? “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil.”

Then, again, as a man’s conscience is sent to sleep, so *his heart is hardened against every holy influence that might move him*. He used to go to a place of worship once, he will not go now. He rails at such places and pours contempt upon Gospel ministers and all Christian people. Though he is as bad as he can be, yet he thinks that he is better than they are and he tries to trample under his feet the saints of God. Though such a wretch as he is not worthy, even, to unloose the latchets of their shoes, he cannot have sufficiently bad names for them.

In former times, when there came sickness into the house, he used to pray. And in time of trouble, he sought the Lord. He has had many a trouble since, but he is not at all disturbed about it—he only gets angry against God, and becomes more and more hardened in sin. His dear wife used to have a wonderful influence over him for good, but he has even broken away from that.

And there is that dear girl of his—he loves her very much and she has pleaded with her father. And there is somebody else there, for a little child has led him, but now he feels that all that is a kind of weakness and he will get beyond it. Ah! he is hardening himself. As for his Bible—alas! he never reads that. If there is a word spoken to him by some kind friend who takes an earnest interest in his welfare, he lets it go in at one ear and out at the other—or else he gets into a furious passion and asks who he is that he is to be talked to like that. He is as good as anybody else though he knows all the while, that he is rotten right through.

What is to be done with a man like that? He is determined to go over hedge and ditch to hell. His father, a dear grey-headed old saint, has blocked the way, but he has pushed him aside. His mother has come and said, “My boy, do not ruin yourself,” and she has hung about his neck and tried to keep him from sin. But he has shaken her off.

In spite of wife, child, and friends, he is determined to destroy himself. And do you tell me that such a man is able to change himself? Yes, when Ethiopians change their skins and when leopards change their own spots, then will it be done, but not till then. The case is hopeless if it remains with the man himself—the work cannot be accomplished.

You will say that now, surely, I have gone far enough in my description of this man, and so I have, painfully far, but what can he do by which he can change his nature and make a new man of himself? *All outward means are unavailing*. He may go and hear sermons. Well, I know that sermons of my

preaching will never turn a heart of stone into flesh. Without the Spirit of God there will be no result whatever produced.

The man may be christened, or he may be baptized, but what is there in water drops or water floods that can alter his sinful nature? Why, there have been villains upon earth who have gone through every religious ceremony and yet have ended at the gallows. You may scrub an Ethiopian till you scrub his skin away, but he will be as black as ever when you have done with him.

So is it with the sinner. You may put him through every form and ceremony of the church—and you may make him think that he has accepted the orthodox creed and you may even alter his outward life to a considerable extent—yet, when it is all done, nothing at all will really have been done towards his soul's salvation.

Somebody perhaps asks, “Why, then, do you preach to these people?” Well, I do it principally because I am sent to do it. You see, if God were to send me to preach to the mountains and to bid them move, I would go and do it—and expect to see them move. If He were to bid me go and stand on the shore, and say to the salt sea waves, “Turn into fresh water,” I should do it, not because I think the sea, which is salt, can make itself fresh, but because my Lord never sent me on a fool's errand and He will honor the message He tells me to deliver.

I heard somebody say that to tell a dead sinner to live was as if you were to stand at a grave and bid a dead body live. That is exactly it, my dear friends, and you say it is ridiculous. Yes, it is very ridiculous if you leave God out of it, but as we are told to do it, we leave the responsibility of it with the Lord—and we intend to go on with this thing which men call ridiculous. Like Ezekiel, we are commanded to say, “O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.” Somebody objects that dry bones cannot hear—that does not matter to us—we are bidden to tell them to hear and we expect that the Lord will enable them to hear what He has commanded us to say to them.

Another reason why we do it is because, when we have been preaching the Gospel to these blackamoors, when we have been holding up Jesus Christ and Him crucified to these Ethiopians, we have seen them turn white. So we shall keep on, dear friends, for though they could not turn themselves white, yet when we have come in the name of the Lord and said to the Ethiopian, “Be white,” he has become white before our very eyes.

I have seen, not only hundreds, but I have seen many thousands of persons from whose lips I have heard the story that, though they were formerly persecutors of Christ and His people, they have become His followers. Or though they were fond of drink and every evil thing, they have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. So I shall keep on bidding sinners do this impossible thing, for God working with me, the withered hand shall be stretched out and the dead Lazarus shall come forth from the grave at the bidding of the Lord.

II. I said that I would finish up with ANOTHER QUESTION AND ANOTHER ANSWER.

I have only two or three minutes in which to speak about them. The question of the text is, “*Can the Ethiopian change his skin?*” The answer is—No, no, no, no, no, no. Here is the other question—*Can the Ethiopian's skin be changed?* The answer to that is—Yes, yes, yes, as emphatically as we have just now said no, no, no. Can the Ethiopian's skin be changed? Can the sinner's nature be renewed? Yes, for *God can do everything*.

He changed primeval darkness into light, He changed chaos into order, and God can turn that poor ruined man—that wretched drunkard, swearer, adulterer, into one who is chaste, and pure, and lovely, and honest, for all things are possible with God. He who made us can new-make us. There is nobody who can put your clock in order so well as the man who made it. If your clock has gone wrong, you had better send it to the maker if you can find him out. And there is nobody who can put a heart in order like the God who made the heart. Send your heart to Him, for He can make it new by His blessed Spirit.

Remember, also, that it is provided in the covenant of grace that *the Holy Spirit should make us new*. It is written, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.” God the Holy Ghost, as a Spirit, is master of our spirits. My dear friend with a bad temper, the Holy Ghost can conquer

that evil. You who have such a forgetful memory, he can conquer that. You who are so proud, He can make you humble. You who feel so hard, He can dissolve the heart of stone, or take it altogether away. Do not doubt that the Ethiopian can have his skin changed by a power outside him and above him.

Further, know you this—the *Lord Jesus Christ has come to save the lost*. If you believe that Jesus is the Christ, you are born of God. If you believe that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, you shall be saved. To put it in other words, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.” Or to give you the whole Gospel as Christ told us to preach it, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”

If you will come, not to do, but to have all done for you—not to merit salvation, but to receive it as a gift of God’s free favor—if you will come just as you are, altogether without desert or anything to plead before God—and you will just say in your heart, “Lord, I adore the love which moved You to give Your Son to die for sinners, and I believe in the great propitiation which He offered for sin,” go your way, you are a saved man. If you thus believe, it is not only that you shall be saved, but you *are* saved.

Have you anything to trust to beside Christ? Then you are lost, for you have a mingled faith that is not of God’s making. But do you wholly, solely, alone, heartily, and entirely fix your hope on the blood and righteousness of Him whom God has set forth to be a propitiation for sin—then you are a saved man and I know that your heart says, “Blessed be God for that! Now that I love God, what can I do for Him?” That is the way.

I noticed, yesterday, when I was talking to some forty persons who had recently found Christ, that they were, all of them either hard at work for the Lord, or they were asking what they could do for Him. Could I tell them something they could do for their dear Lord who had saved them? There is far more done out of love than there is out of law. Men will not, cannot, do anything to be saved, but when saved, what is there that we cannot do? Live, and then do. Not, do and live. Live in Christ and then serve Him, but do not put the cart before the horse.

Come, dear friends, and trust in Christ. The Lord bless you by His divine Spirit leading you to do so, for Jesus’ sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

PSALM 78:9-72

This story of the children of Israel, after they came out of Egypt, is like a looking-glass in which we may, with great sadness, see ourselves reflected.

Verse 9. *The children of Ephraim, being armed, and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle.*

They had every opportunity of serving their God. He had provided them with fit weapons for the war, but they were cowardly, so they “turned back in the day of battle.”

10-11. *They kept not the covenant of God, and refused to walk in his law; and forgot his works, and his wonders that he had shewed them.*

Let each one of us ask, “Does the psalmist describe me?”

12-13. *Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan. He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through; and he made the waters to stand as an heap.*

What a marvelous miracle that dividing of the Red Sea was! Did it not make an abiding impression upon them? I will be bound to say that many of them said, “We shall never doubt God again.” Yet, they soon did doubt, and murmur, and rebel against Him!

14-16. *In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire. He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths. He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers.*

It seemed as if there was nothing that the Lord would not do for them—all that they needed for food and refreshment was given to them freely.

17-18. *And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness. And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust.*

He had given them food for their necessities, but now they must have meat for their lusts.

19. *Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?*

So you see, dear friends, what speaking against God really is. I am afraid that we also have often done that. To question God's power is to speak against Him. Perhaps you have thought lightly of your unbelieving speeches, but God does not think lightly of them—to my mind it seems that there is hardly anything that so grieves Him as the doubts of His people concerning Him.

20. *Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give bread also? Can he provide flesh for his people?*

There ought to have been no question as to the Lord's power—the God who could fetch water out of a rock could, if He pleased, make loaves of bread out of the sand under their feet, or cause the very stars to drop with meat for them if necessary.

21. *Therefore the LORD heard this, and was wroth:*

He was really angry with His people because they doubted Him. He loved them, and because He loved them, it cut Him to the quick that they should have questioned His power to bless them.

21-23. *So a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel; because they believed not in God, and trusted not in his salvation: though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven,*

Unbelief is very hard to kill. God opens the doors and windows of heaven to feed His people, yet, nevertheless, the next time they are in trouble, they begin to stagger at the promise. Oh, shameful unbelief!

24-29. *And had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven. Man did eat angels' food: he sent them meat to the full. He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven: and by his power he brought in the south wind. He rained flesh also upon them as dust, and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea: and he let it fall in the midst of their camp, round about their habitations. So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire;*

Yet that was not a blessing to them, and brethren, let us ever be afraid of our own desire, unless that desire comes from the Lord. You know how David puts it in the 37th Psalm—"Delight thyself also, in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." If, however, you find your delight in any earthly thing, it shall be a plague to you to have the desire of your heart. "He gave them their own desire;"

30. *They were not estranged from their lust.*

For the more lust gets, the more lust wants. It is like the daughter of the horse-leech that always cries, "Give! Give!" God can satisfy the longing soul, but all the world cannot satisfy the cravings of lust.

30-31. *But while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel.*

They received what they pined for, but they had a curse with it. Affliction with a blessing is far better than prosperity with a curse.

32. *For all this they sinned still, and believed not for his wondrous works.*

They were dyed ingrain with unbelief, so that it seemed as if it could not be washed out of them.

33. *Therefore their days did he consume in vanity, and their years in trouble.*

A great part of our trouble is the fruit of our own unbelief. It is like hemlock in the furrows of the field. They who distrust God are making a rod for their own back, and before they have done with it, they will have to rue the day in which they thought themselves wiser than God.

34-36. *When he slew them, then they sought him: and they returned and enquired early after God. And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer. Nevertheless they did flatter him with their mouth, and they lied unto him with their tongues.*

Some men are like dull animals that will not go without the whip. Many of us cannot be kept right without constant affliction. If our God gives us a little smooth walking, we go half-asleep, or we trip and stumble. And so He is compelled, as it were, to make our way very rough, and often to strike us with the rod to keep us from falling altogether into sinful slumber. How many there are who, when they seem to turn to God in times of sickness, are not truly penitent! A death-bed repentance may be true, but oh, what a risk there is that it may be false!

37-51. *For their heart was not right with him, neither were they stedfast in his covenant. But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath. For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again. How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert! Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They remembered not his hand, nor the day when he delivered them from the enemy. How he had wrought his signs in Egypt, and his wonders in the field of Zoan: And had turned their rivers into blood; and their floods, that they could not drink. He sent divers sorts of flies among them, which devoured them; and frogs, which destroyed them. He gave also their increase unto the caterpillar, and their labour unto the locust. He destroyed their vines with hail, and their sycomore trees with frost. He gave up their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts. He cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, and indignation, and trouble, by sending evil angels among them. He made a way to his anger; he spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence; and smote all the firstborn in Egypt; the chief of their strength in the tabernacles of Ham:*

This is what God did with their enemies who had oppressed them, that He might set His people at liberty. After all that, ought they not to have trusted Him as a little child trusts its mother, without ever a question or a doubt? While He thus overthrew their enemies, see what He did for His own people.

52-56. *But made his own people to go forth like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. And he led them on safely, so that they feared not: but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. And he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, even to this mountain, which his right hand had purchased. He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents. Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies:*

This sad note seems to come over and over again, as if they never could have too much of grieving God. Yet the Lord was still tender towards them. Well may we sing,—

*“Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?”*

57-64. *But turned back, and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers: they were turned aside like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images. When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel: so that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men; and delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand. He gave his people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with his inheritance. The fire consumed their young men; and their maidens were not given to marriage. Their priests fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation.*

They were dumb with excess of grief. When God chastises His children, He does not play at it. Sometimes, when He is angry at their sin, He lays on the blows fast and heavily, till their very bones are broken, so that they may hate sin as God hates it, and seek after holiness even as God loves it.

So, dear friends, I pray that if any of us have lost the consolations of God and are feeling the weight of His rod, we may begin to inquire what secret thing it is in us which has angered Him, and go back to Him, and seek to stand before Him as once we did. For, otherwise, He will smite, and smite, and smite

yet again and again. But notice that the Lord never delights in chastening His children. He is glad to have done with the necessary correction. So, when their enemies were most cruel with them,—

65-69. *Then the Lord awaked as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. And he smote his enemies in the hinder parts: he put them to a perpetual reproach. Moreover he refused the tabernacle of Joseph, and chose not the tribe of Ephraim: but chose the tribe of Judah, the mount Zion which he loved. And he built his sanctuary like high palaces, like the earth which he hath established for ever.*

You see that we are getting into clear water now—it was all broken water, storm and hurricane, while we heard of what Israel did—but when we come to deal with God in Christ, of whom David is the type, then how sweetly everything goes!

70-72. *He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds: from following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands.*

Blessed be God who puts away the sin of His people, because He delights in mercy!

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—489, 474, 448

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